

## ***E. coli* O157:H7**

### **FACT SHEET**

#### **What is *E. coli* O157:H7?**

*E. coli* are bacteria that normally live in the intestines of humans and animals. Although most strains of *E. coli* are harmless, several are known to produce toxins that can cause illness. One particular *E. coli* strain called O157:H7 can cause severe diarrhea, kidney damage, and even death.

#### **Who gets *E. coli* O157:H7 infection?**

Anyone can become infected with *E. coli* O157:H7, but children and the elderly are more likely to develop serious complications.

#### **How is *E. coli* O157:H7 spread?**

The illness is acquired by ingesting food or water containing the bacteria. The bacteria can be found in the intestines of some cattle, and contamination of the meat may occur in the slaughtering process. Eating meat (especially ground) that is rare or inadequately cooked is a common way of getting the infection. Infection can occur by contaminating surfaces and utensils with raw meat and then preparing uncooked foods on those surfaces without washing them. Also vegetables, fruits, and unpasteurized fruit juices can be contaminated. Petting or handling infected animals without washing your hands immediately afterwards is another way this disease can be spread. Person-to-person transmission can occur if infected people do not wash their hands after using the toilet.

#### **What are the symptoms of *E. coli* O157:H7 infection?**

Most identified cases develop severe diarrhea and abdominal cramps. Blood is often seen in the stool. Fever may or may not be present. Some infected people may have mild diarrhea or no symptoms at all.

In some people, particularly children under five years of age, the infection causes a complication called hemolytic uremic syndrome (HUS). This is a serious disease in which the kidneys fail. Some people with HUS recover completely after medical treatment, but many have life long complications from this disease. HUS can be fatal.

#### **How soon after the exposure do symptoms appear?**

The symptoms usually appear about three days after exposure but may be as short as one day or as long as nine days.

### **How is *E. coli* O157:H7 infection treated?**

Most people recover without treatment within 5 to 10 days. Persons with bloody diarrhea should consult a physician for treatment. Medications like Imodium or Lomotil should not be given to persons suspected of having *E. coli* O157:H7 or persons with bloody diarrhea.

### **How can infection with *E. coli* O157:H7 be prevented?**

- The single most important way to prevent the spread of disease is careful handwashing. Wash hands thoroughly:
  - After use of restroom.
  - Before preparation of foods.
  - After handling raw meat.
  - After completion of food preparation.
  - After handling animals or their feces.
- Thoroughly wash fruits and vegetables before consumption.
- Thoroughly cook all foodstuffs derived from animal sources, especially ground beef.
- Use only pasteurized milk, dairy products, and juices.
- Refrigerate foods promptly; don't hold at room temperature any longer than necessary.
- Wash cutting boards, utensils and food preparation counters with soap and water immediately after use.
- Use a meat thermometer to assure that the correct internal cooking temperature is reached. The correct temperature is 160°F for beef and pork, and 185°F for poultry.
- Prevent cross-contamination. Never let raw meat or meat juices come in contact with cooked meat or any other food, raw or cooked.

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